

**Title:**

Off the wall. Teacher perceptions of an arts integrated school and its student population. A case study

Journal Issue:

[Journal for Learning through the Arts, 12\(1\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2016

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5mb825kg>

Author Bio:

Recently retired Vice Principal of a learning through the arts elementary school within the British Columbia Lower Mainland public system. A long and varied teaching career spanning K through post-secondary institutions, which motivated me to undertake doctoral research at the University of British Columbia within the Department of Educational Studies. My background in music and association with one particular elementary school was the impetus for this research. I continue to research trends in schools of choice in terms of both curricular structures and implications for social justice

Keywords:

arts-integrated pedagogy, elementary school, catchment area, teacher perceptions;

Local Identifier:

class_lta_23286

Abstract:

This paper, derived from a larger case study, presents new perspectives on arts-integrated elementary schools. It focusses on several issues including teacher understandings of arts-integrated pedagogy, willingness to collaborate, arts credentials, and teacher perceptions of those students enrolling from outside catchment area. Hence it raises the question as to whether school districts should consider new policies specific to arts-integrated schools for both students enrolling, and teaching staff. As a teacher-administrator at Mosaic for several years, the researcher became interested in the motivations for student enrollments from outside of Mosaic's catchment area. Through interviews with educators and parents, the case study investigates perceptions and motivations for student enrollments. This paper's focus is the analysis of interviews with Mosaic educators: their understandings and perspectives on arts-integrated pedagogy, student profiles, and their own valuing of the arts.

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Off the Wall: A Case Study of Changing Teacher Perceptions of Arts-Integrated Pedagogy and Student Population

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Abstract. *This paper recounts the establishment of a fine arts (or arts-integrated) elementary school in British Columbia, Canada. Slated for closure, it found new life as a fine arts school of choice. On the surface, the school appeared to be a thriving, functioning community. Nevertheless, tensions existed among the staff; feelings of mistrust arose based, in part, on differing levels of visual and performing arts expertise. Additionally, a noticeable pattern of learning needs became evident among students enrolling from outside of the school's catchment area. This resulted in a general feeling that the school was becoming a place for students who experienced difficulties socially, behaviorally and academically. This group was at times described as "off the wall." This qualitative case study draws on one-on-one interviews with parents, teachers and administrators (both school- and district-based), with a specific focus on data obtained from interviews with teachers concerning their perceptions of arts-based pedagogy, arts credentialing, and student populations.*

In the beginning

In the beginning, Mosaic¹ Elementary School accommodated approximately 350 students. Built in 1965 to ease overflowing student populations at neighboring schools, its numbers gradually slipped away due to changing demographics, a not uncommon phenomenon. A mainly working class neighborhood in 1965, Mosaic and the surrounding elementary schools were attended by children of predominantly British, Italian and Portuguese ethnicities, which changed little over the years, although today there is a broader ethnic profile that includes larger numbers of Hispanic and Asian groups. But in 2004 its two floors housed only 90 students rattling about within five classrooms. This was unusual for a school district whose total kindergarten to Grade 12 population is currently approximately 24,000 students across 41 elementary and 8 secondary schools.

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Names of institutions, school districts and people have been changed for the purposes of privacy.

Mosaic offered the standard British Columbia Ministry of Education-mandated curriculum, staffed by elementary “generalist” teachers. Aesthetically pleasing in its location at the edge of a park, and conveniently located close to public transportation and commercial facilities, its closure remained imminent, until, in 2005, it became a fine arts school. Today Mosaic’s enrolment is 234, its growth attributable mainly to those students enrolling from outside its catchment area. Since then, other elementary schools with declining populations have managed to survive by transitioning to an arts-integrated pedagogy.² But this is the story of Mosaic Elementary school, and the unexpected consequences of making such a transition.

Creating a school of choice

Mosaic Elementary as an arts-based school came into being due to the vision of a group of teachers working at a nearby elementary school who believed that it would be an exciting and innovative addition to the district. Initially, in June 2002, two teachers met with district administrators to explore such a possibility. Timing may have played an important role in the district’s interest, since the Ministry of Education had on May 31st introduced a new bill (Bill 34) that changed its funding formula from a per school to a per student basis (Fallon & Paquette, 2009). Hence, the onus was now placed on school districts to corporatize and create new income-generating opportunities. One lucrative means was to recruit international students, and the other was to approve the creation of schools with a specific curricular focus. Such focus, or “schools of choice,” would not only draw students from across the district but from outside of the city. This would bring new funding into the district. Additionally, it would prove that school districts were more responsive to learners’ needs and to parents (Fallon & Paquette, 2009).

Davies and Aurini (2008) state that schools of choice are rarely initiated by teachers, but more typically “endorsed by politicians and parents who want educators to comply with their wants for a particular school philosophy” (p. 58). Yet Mosaic’s transition began with a teacher committee composed both of generalists and visual and performing arts specialists, an elementary principal who had been a music teacher, and the district fine arts consultant. After three years of investigating fine arts schools in other districts, meetings with district administrators and elected school board officials, a written proposal and catchment-area community meetings—attended by parents, school district representatives and elected school board officials—Mosaic elementary opened its doors in 2005 as a place of arts-integrated learning. The district signalled its clear support for the transition by approving new instruments for the music room, purchasing sound and lighting equipment for performances, and providing the necessary funding required to transform two unused classrooms into dance and art rooms. There were no queries as to how the proposal’s arts integration would be delivered, nor were there any curricular directives. The Mosaic staff would need to work through these questions on their own.

The study

The data for this paper is taken from research I conducted at Mosaic in the form of a case study. My intent is to present an analysis of teacher understandings and perceptions of fine arts, (more recently referred to as arts-integrated) elementary schools in the public school system. I

2 One such example is Queen Alexandra Elementary School in Vancouver, B.C.

draw on interviews I conducted with teachers who were actively involved in Mosaic's new pedagogical transition, mainly focusing on teachers' perceptions of the arts and how they value or understand them. The impetus for this qualitative study is derived from my own tenure at the school over several years and my observations of students enrolling from outside of the catchment area. Those enrolments eventuated in substantial changes to the overall school population as described in the following table:

Table 1

Mosaic population over 8 years

School Composition	Elementary Public School 2005	Arts-Integrated Elementary Public School 2013 ³
Student enrolment	90	229
*Enrolling teachers	4.5	10
Non-enrolling teachers	3	7
Ministry-designated students	4	29
English language learners	16	15
Aboriginal students	3	8
School administrator	1 (with .4 teaching assignment)	1 (with .15 teaching assignment)
Head Teacher	1	1
# of rooms utilized for teaching	10	18 (with the addition of 3 portables)
School secretary	1	1
Teacher assistant	0	.5
Custodian	1.2	1.5

*staffing based on full-time teaching equivalents (FTE)

Enrolment numbers aside, of particular interest is the rise in ministry-designated students. The designations identify students who suffer from chronic health problems, or are learning and intellectually disabled, blind, deaf, adult dependent, physically dependent, gifted, or having mild behavioural to severe behaviour/mental illness. Such data, and the similarities among students enrolling from outside the Mosaic catchment area motivated my research.

Method

Invitations for personal interviews were extended to teachers who had been at Mosaic as an arts-integrated school from its beginning in 2005. Criteria included at least five years teaching experience at one or more elementary schools prior to working at Mosaic. The invitations yielded interviews with two principals (now retired), a music/dance specialist, and four classroom teachers⁴. (The current principal is not included in this study because she was assigned to Mosaic midway through the interview process.) Of the four teachers, George, then

3 The enrolment for the year 2015-2016 showed an increase to 234 students

retired, was included, because he had played a significant role in the establishment of the school. Both former principals had specializations in either music or visual arts. None of the four classroom teachers had formal arts credentials, but three had a sincere interest in the arts, while the other had no particular interest. Her main reason for applying to the school was its proximity to home. The average length of each interview was one hour.

Parents whose children had been enrolled from outside the Mosaic catchment area were also invited to be interviewed. Their children had to be in an intermediate grade (4-7) and at Mosaic for at least two years. Additionally, invitations were extended to families residing in the Mosaic catchment area, but whose children were enrolling there for the first time. Relevant school documents-- mainly cross and out-of-district transfer forms--were scrutinized. However for the purpose of this study, only teacher interviews will be addressed.

Defining the arts

First, I will explain *fine arts* and *arts-integrated*. *Fine arts* is more commonly referenced than *arts-integrated* and is a general descriptor of arts-based learning. However, *fine arts* also specifies visual and performing arts, which can be confusing. Additionally, *fine arts school* can be misleading, as for example, in this study I learned that some Mosaic parents had envisioned a program akin to LaGuardia High School of Music and the Performing Arts in New York City, site of the 1980 movie, *Fame*. However, Mosaic is not a performance school. It focuses on a process-based learning environment achieved through arts integration. I use *fine arts school* in general terms, but will reference *arts-integrated* when discussing pedagogy.

Valuing the arts in education

There are good reasons to believe that the visual and performing arts are enablers of student success (as exemplified by Brewer, 2002; Brouillette, 2010; Charland, 2011; Colley, 2012; Long, 2012; Hawes et al; Sayers Adomat, 2012). Hence, an arts-integrated pedagogy is an attractive learning option. However, Colley (2012), Charland (2011), Noblit and colleagues (2009), Hornbacher, Lipscomb and Scripp (2008) and Gaskell (1995) all speak to the difficulties involved: on-site arts specialists, time issues, collaboration, seniority, testing, accountability, and individual teacher's own commitment to the arts.

Bresler (1995) speaks to levels of arts integration expertise, the desired level being that of "co-equal cognitive" (true integration administered by an arts professional) (p. 33), which is "least prevalent in practice" (p. 33). In her research survey of arts-integrated teaching across several elementary schools, Bresler most regularly observed the subservient (add-on) style. Similarly, Mishook and Kornhaber (2006) found that a subservient integration was most regularly practiced.

That this more basic use of arts integration is more commonly found, is likely predicated on confidence levels in teaching through the arts. Confidence among Mosaic staff did suffer after it transitioned to an arts-integrated school. The first years of Mosaic's new arts focus saw misunderstandings between staff and administration, emotional outbursts, and one scene that effectively cleared the hallways. For several days the staffroom was a ghost town. One could

⁴ Three were intermediate, and one was primary

say that this was a bumpy start. Yet, initially, there was little staff turnover. Whether it was because they believed in arts integration or art for art's sake is not clear. Perhaps the answer lies in the wider history of the arts in elementary education.

A little history

Franz Cizek and Carl Orff were two pioneers of music and visual arts in education. Franz Cizek (c. 1918) invited children to make abstract pictures to explore “emotions such as envy, fury and rage” (Malvern, 1995, p. 265). Carl Orff encouraged the collaboration of art, music, dance and drama (c. 1924), and it is Orff’s *Schulwerk* (c. 1930) that forms the foundation for elementary school music programs throughout my school district. School districts have found new interest in the post-World War II *Reggio Emilia* program, which encourages creative and diverse thinking in pre-school and primary-school age children. Such programs underscore the value of the arts and their capacity to generate a new venue for learning, unlike “the still alarmingly commonplace deficit model of pedagogy, where the learner is constructed as lacking” (Adams, 2010, p. 687). Adams further asserts that this in turn limits the potential for building a learning community of creative thinkers.

There has been substantial inquiry into arts-integrated pedagogy including Noblit and colleagues’ (2009) eight-year study where they query whether the arts can be “justified for the creativity they involve or for their utility in other domains” (p. 36), and conclude that if the arts have not been able to justify themselves as discrete subjects, then “much effort has been put into the latter” (p. 36). Yet not everyone agrees that the arts should be seen as teaching strategies or enablers of other skills. In 1955, Margaret Berger-Hamerschlag, a former student of Franz Cizek, published her memoirs about teaching art to adolescents in working class East London. While no longer current literature, it nevertheless echoes teachers’ ongoing concerns on the reasons behind children attending arts-integrated schools.

Art has been introduced into day schools not so much in order to raise a true understanding (this is regarded as a by-product) but rather because psychologists have discovered it to be healthy for the child’s mind. It can unburden itself by painting and lay bare its problems for detection. (Berger-Hamerschlag, 1955, pp. 19-21).

Other literature from the same decade, such as Herbert Read’s seminal *Education Through Art*, disclose another point of view. Published in 1958, it continues to support arts integration: “Art, widely conceived, should be the fundamental basis of education” (p. 70). More recently, Brewer (2002) would not be in disagreement with Berger-Hamerschlag, arguing that,

If the arts are not studied for their own content and ways of knowing, if they are always studied as humanities disciplines or as supports to other disciplines the specific knowledge and skills associated with artistic modes of thought will not be present in a student’s education. (p. 33)

Finally Brouillete (2010), in discussing the value of the arts in education asks, “Should a focus on the social-emotional development of students be an expectation for all arts teachers?” (p. 22).

Colley (2012) lists five key strengths of the arts in education. Eisner (2002) speaks to the value of the arts in education through a listing of 10 key points. Gaskell discusses the social benefits of fine arts schools as voiced by parents and teachers, as in this example from the Langley Fine Arts School in Langley, British Columbia.

[Teacher] The school is seen as more accepting of differences than other schools...I think there are, quite frankly, many students in this school who would not survive in another school, or [who] would be buried in another school, whether that's in the sense that they would be shoved to the back of the class and wouldn't utter much, or, whether [they] would be teased and ostracized by their peers. (Gaskell, 1995, p. 146)

Do the teachers at Mosaic agree with this?

Mosaic then and now

As previously noted, prior to its transition, the Mosaic student population sat at 90 and has risen in 2016 to 234, driven by students' attending from outside of its catchment area. As a result, the number of teachers and support staff has also risen along with ministry-designated students. It has resulted in many discussions on the reason for Mosaic's success: Is it due to the positioning of the arts in the curriculum, or because the arts are deemed to enable positive academic and social outcomes?

To investigate this question, I asked both teachers and administrators whether they had noticed a similarity among the students enrolling at the school from outside of the catchment area-- from either public or private schools. Anna, a mid-to-upper intermediate teacher believes that arts-based elementary schools draw children who are struggling with academic success.

[They arrive] typically at the grade 4ish level and it's interesting because it's the grade level where they get marks...For a couple of years, it's easy to kind of blame the teachers, the kids, the environment, but now there's an accountability. "I better get my kid somewhere else and maybe they'll be more accepting...My kid, she likes to dance, she likes to draw therefore that must be creativity and there's a fine arts school. Hopefully they'll fit in there."

Anna was not unique in her mention of academic success, acceptance and fitting in. Other teachers spoke more directly to the different types of challenges that children from outside of the catchment area were bringing to Mosaic:

I was starting to notice, and you know again I don't spend much time looking at the enrolment. We have a lot of special needs kids, a lot of behavior kids, a lot of that kind of thing going on. "Oh they like art, we'll put them there they will be ok," and I was thinking, these are the kind of kids who shouldn't be at the school. (Dana)

Dana clearly believes that parents regard the arts as enablers of success. Unique to these interviews is Dana's assertion that fine arts school place more demands on students and teachers, and that parents do not seem to consider this.

They think it will just be arty and really you have to do way better on your academics – because if I’m going to fit an hour of drama and an hour of music every week into my program, then they better be listening during math and language arts because I have less time. You just have to listen to some of the intermediate teachers who talk about the kids who are struggling in basic math skills. Why do you think they are? I can tell you why. They don’t get enough math time!

I also asked Dana about the perception of fine arts schools as a type of bandage or cure.

Well it’s one thing if you say, well, “My child struggles with behavior,” but they’re maybe gifted musically. I see that as something completely different than what we’re talking about. Because what I was seeing was, well, “My kid can’t hack it at this school so I’ll try the fine arts school where they spend more time doing drama and art and music.” (Dana)

Similarly, Carla voiced her frustrations with some parents’ reasons for enrolling their children at Mosaic.

It’s hard enough with a kid in grade 5 and the parents are thinking. “Yeah, they just don’t have any friends, they’re being bullied, I’ll put them in a fine arts school.” The parents are thinking, “I’ve got to try something.” I struggle with that. I really have a hard time with that. Parents who have a good handle on their kids they must know that at least their kids are interested in the arts. (Carla)

Several parents interviews did reveal their assumption that Mosaic would have among other things, a flexible timetable, flexible assessment practices, and, in the words of one parent, “Time in the classroom would mean working on non-textbook, more visual arts” (Meghan, parent). Therefore, it became clear to me throughout the course of this research, that some parents had not properly investigated the school and its practices prior to enrolment.

During my interview with Dana I mentioned the notion of fine arts schools being a last chance mechanism (Kelly, 1993) for some students.

Well I guess there has always been that thing, that kind of reputation of anybody can pass art, right? Anybody can take art, anybody can pass it and if you work hard at it you’ll be able to get it...It was really scaring me when I was here and I saw that happening and I thought, “What are we becoming a behavioural school?”...When we ended up what was it, last year the year before they had 14 designated students⁵ between two grade seven classes – that is an issue considering our population. (Dana)

While the current ratio of ministry designations is less than 1:10 among the overall student population, this high rate is not limited to just one year. It happened at the beginning, as recounted by George, an upper intermediate teacher who retired in 2009.

5 The collective agreement for teachers in Mosaic’s school district specifies a maximum of three ministry designated students per classroom.

The first year we were designated a fine arts school, in my class I had three new students come in because it was a fine arts school, one who definitely belonged but was definitely off the wall. This was the right school for her... The second year, in all the years that I taught...rarely do you get many new Grade seven students, and that year 10 came in. Of the 10 you could not get a more diverse set of students. Some in-area, catchment, home school, Montessori, Waldorf, from the streets, basically a street kid, every single one of them had some sort of exceptional-- they weren't exceptional-- some specific needs that they thought a fine arts school would be able to address and it did to some extent do that (George, retired)

I have underlined certain phrases, because it is evident that, like Dana, George sees the school as an opportunity for students with varying challenges.

Doesn't surprise me, [parents thinking],"Hey, they'll be better here. They can play, they can fool around in drama they can play around with a paintbrush"...Those parents they just think it is just a solution and they're maybe not thinking. "I need something this kid is off the wall I need something." So this is what they try. (Dana)

Dana also references that phrase "off the wall," which begs the question as to whether criteria for admittance should be developed, in order to avoid misunderstandings about the school's purpose.

Whether Mosaic attracts struggling students is up for debate, but Marion did make the interesting remark that, "When I walked in the doors of this school I felt we had two to three times more behavior problems than I had at [another school] with a student population of 500." Equally interesting was her recollection of attending district meetings.

Some of the kids, the parents didn't very often admit when their children were being problems, but sometimes I would run into a teacher or administrator at a previous school and they would ask, "How is so and so doing...boy, we were sure glad to see the back end of that family!" (Marion, retired principal)

Empathetic to the needs of students, Marion insisted that Mosaic was inclusive and not exclusive; "This is a place for everybody and anybody." As Mosaic's inaugural principal, Marion shared her experiences over five years, and in the process disclosed a hidden criteria:

Most of the people that were coming to talk to me were coming either looking for a different school for their child because they might not have been doing so well, or somewhere else because they already saw that their child had a creative bent...Many programs are formula-driven with lots and lots of worksheets. I explained that in something like this there had to be a lot more of creative group work going on.

Bridget, the second principal, and at the school for only two years, could offer less insight. Nevertheless she did support the idea that Mosaic would be more accepting.

I think that's the other part of being this type of school that there are so many different talents and abilities and the children are very accepting of quirkiness and individuality and those unique traits. (Bridget)

Bridget offered the example of a student from her previous school to whom she had recommended Mosaic. "She was artistic and creative but socially just was not accepted by the other kids and we thought this might be a place where she would fit in."

From these excerpts it is clear that both teachers and administrators share Bridget's belief that the arts positively impact the student "who is not fitting into the typical box". If the school's (unofficial) credo is akin to Bridget's concept of an atypical box, then it is not surprising that Carla offered the following advice to a friend who wanted to enrol her kindergarten-age child in a fine arts school in another school district. She pointed out:

I don't think the fine arts will be a challenge the way you are thinking of it being an academic challenge. You get all these parents who have all these problems [at a fine arts school]. I don't know what other fine arts schools are like, I have no idea, but that's what happened here. I'm not convinced you will get that structure [that your daughter needs].

This particular image of a school lacking in structure and filled with needy parents is a provocative idea. Regardless, Mosaic's teachers are still responsible for the delivery of the B.C. Ministry of Education curriculum.

Arts-integrated pedagogy

What is arts-integrated pedagogy? Do we really understand what this is? Arts integration. You can make it look like you're integrating when it kind of looks like I'm doing social studies and here's a cool art project that goes with that unit and I think a lot of teachers can do that at any school. How many years ago was it we just called that themes? (Anna)

Is "integration" just a new term for "theme"? Mosaic's new pedagogy has certainly been pulled in different directions depending on individual classroom teachers. Consequently teachers shared their frustration with what they have considered to be uneven levels of commitment and this had led to some discontent.

I still find this collective group of people [to be] people who might fit in at another school because they don't seem to be worried about that level of commitment that I brought so it frustrates me as an individual. (Anna)

While subjectively comparing her situation to that of other teachers, Anna is not alone in voicing this concern.

I found that at times there are some of the staff who are not as interested in kind of going out there and trying something different and really ... well definitely not stretching themselves but just kind of just you know, "I'll just close my door and do my thing" and I don't think you can do that in a school like this. (Dana)

Dana refers to the perception of a closed-door policy and, therefore, a lack of collaboration among teachers. Likewise Carla, a major in kinesiology, expressed her dismay that not all teachers had embraced the implementation of an arts-integrated pedagogy.

Even if teachers didn't have the qualifications at least they would have the passion and the interests that was the first thing. Second, I thought there would be more collaboration. What I am struggling with is I want to have more integration in my program. I really like the idea of working with other teachers, I always have. I'm finding that not happening [it's] almost like a competition. I don't work that way and I never have. (Carla)

It is interesting that Mason, Steedly and Thormann (2008) assert that collaborative time among classroom teachers and arts specialists is an important part of professional development in arts-integrated teaching. In their research, they found that some teachers tended to work in isolation (p. 45). Collaboration has been one problem, but another concern has been the lack of professional growth in arts-integrated pedagogy, which may account for the isolation and lack of confidence. Research by Alter, Hays and O'Hara (2009) found that teachers were generally the least confident in the teaching of music, dance, drama and art in that order (p. 26).

The conundrum of credentials

The first question that I asked teachers was how they defined *fine arts*. Teacher responses varied. For example, Anna side-stepped the question by asking "What does fine arts *mean*?" while Dana and Carla took a more pedagogical stance explaining, as in Dana's response, the incorporation of the arts "into what I'm doing with the kids." Carla saw the arts as a link to language arts. George defined fine arts as "music, drama, visual arts and dance," while Becky stated honestly, "I can't answer that [question]."

Clearly, these teachers have their own perceptions of the arts, as well as of Mosaic and its pedagogy. This includes a fundamental difference on the question of arts credentials versus no arts credentials. For example, Becky, an arts specialist, believes that some arts qualifications are necessary for Mosaic teachers. When I asked her why, she answered, "Why? Because it's more than just a passion for the fine arts. There has to be that core understanding of skill and foundation to be able to build skills for the students themselves." By contrast, Anna, who has acquired her arts skills through professional development workshops, had a different viewpoint.

I think the key to being a good teacher, everybody can find the same information, resources for curriculum...I think you have to be a teacher who wants to take on the challenge of taking on the curricular area...I think you can be a great artist and not a great teacher and you can put on a great play and not have the skills to teach children how to do it...It's more about the person and personality and their teaching style than their teaching credentials.

However, as the discussion continued, Anna did admit that music and dance would require a skilled specialist, while drama and visual art could be managed by the classroom teacher. This perspective paves the way for a visual and performing arts hierarchy: an arts value scale. Wanting to push Anna's point about good teaching over credentials, I told her that I didn't think I could teach PE. Her response was, "You could if you wanted to," privileging ones desire, popularly termed "passion," over ability and training. George, who is not an arts specialist, saw the value of both sides of the argument.

Yes and no. I really think it's important that there are teachers for core fine arts but I think the people who come in should have a strong desire in one of the areas, and want to do professional growth to become more competent [but] there has to be the expertise in the school if you're going to call it a fine arts school. (Teacher 4, retired)

George also alluded to the importance of personal desire to teach in a fine arts school, saying that he “would go for passion over perfunctory any time because passion can be transferred.” Dana explained the importance of good teaching practice over arts credentials:

Well that would [arts credentials] totally leave me out, I think, because I don't have dance education, I don't have music education. I mean I didn't even take art in high school because I was an academic kid but I think it's more about being able to embrace those strands of arts and not necessarily that you are proficient in doing them yourself. (Dana)

Dana did not take art in high school because she was “an academic kid.” Such a comment places the arts squarely within the category of educational aide: an intrinsic value when embedded in another subject area, but not necessarily a stand-alone academic subject.

Teacher appointments

If some teacher interviews reveal that passion and a will to teach a new subject override skills and training, then what is the district’s perception of the arts in education? I ask this particularly in light of Carla’s statement: “I don’t have those [fine arts] qualifications and I made that quite clear in my interview.” This candid remark earned her a place at Mosaic, because the collective bargaining agreement with the district’s Union local privileges seniority over subject-specific credentials at the elementary school level.

Seniority aside, any teacher appointed to Mosaic was expected to embrace the arts-integrated pedagogy. Anna, at Mosaic since its transition, asserts that some teachers have not done this, instead relying on Becky, Mosaic’s music and dance teacher, to provide the necessary arts pedagogy.

I have a lot of problems with other classroom teachers. Becky is seen as a specialist, oh yeah, Becky can do it because when it comes down to it thanks for doing the work. Because I can’t do it anyway! (Anna)

In this case, the teacher has sidestepped the purpose of the school’s arts-integrated pedagogy and has thus invalidated her own purpose for being at Mosaic. Yet it is not entirely fair to blame the teacher. Part of the problem rests in the initial set-up for arts-based education.

The importance of working as a team

While the principal’s role clearly requires leadership and vision, it nevertheless requires that the principal value teacher input, that is, sharing of ideas. Marion, Mosaic’s first fine arts school principal, successfully negotiated its transition, but, unfortunately, the opportunity to build a clear structure for arts integration was lost when she decided to create a schedule based on platooning. Platooning describes the subject-specific teaching of curriculum in secondary schools with teacher specialists (whereas elementary teachers are considered to be generalists):

hence students more in groups from one subject to another as in a platoon. In an elementary school, it simply created a timetable for teachers to take their students to trained arts specialists on a weekly basis, thereby sabotaging in effect arts integration. What was a potential opportunity for staff to develop an organic “grassroots” pedagogy was effectively halted by platooning. Arts integration in the classroom and curriculum development were delayed and confused. Further, since levels of commitment and training in the arts varied, the visual classroom products, proudly evident in the school’s hallways, tended to suggest that some teachers were better educators, resulting in serious trust issues among staff.

Trust in the arts

While analyzing my interview data and specifically teacher perceptions of the arts, I was surprised to discover that trust, as a discussion point, arose when teachers were asked: (a) whether they had had to rethink their pedagogical approach as a result of being at a fine arts school, and (b) what their expectations had been upon being assigned to the school. Asked how teaching at a fine arts school compared to their expectations, teachers offered the following comments:

I’m feeling really good about the music and dance program especially the dance program, because that was new to me... It’s the hit and miss. It depends on the staff that I work with and it depends on the relations and if the relations aren’t there because there’s such a trust factor things don’t seem to get off the ground. (Becky)

Anna particularly, expressed her disappointment in how some staff members had perceived her. The following excerpt shows a more emotional side to her generally nonplused persona.

It’s been difficult. It’s like the more you do the more trouble you get into. The more you stand out, the more you shine the more resentment. ... The shut door policy and the whisper policy... very hurtful...Jealousies, parent-friendly. People now think it’s okay to talk in an entire staffroom about somebody? (Anna)

Carla also used jealousy in describing staff relations. Trust issues have driven some teachers behind closed doors, thus leaving those outside the doors to learn to be distrustful. This situation has arisen for two reasons: (a) teachers apply to Mosaic without a clear perception of what the school’s mandate is; and (b) the weaknesses in the district hiring policy. For example, Dana “actually didn’t know that it was a fine arts school when I applied.” Carla, who had been very truthful about the fact that it had been the school’s proximity to her home that drew her there, admitted that “It wasn’t the fine arts that got my interest at first.” That is was not an inner-city school caught Anna and Dana’s attention.

I wasn’t trying anything different it wasn’t challenging, been-there-done-that and I needed something more. This is something different having to put kinda myself out there in a zone that was not always comfortable for me but one I thought I could get a grip on. (Dana)

I wanted a different school, with more parent involvement. A fine arts school I thought, oh, that would be cool...So I thought, if I go there, there will be a lot of people like me who are happy to be in the classroom who are looking for a new challenge. They’re bored

they'll go let's explore together...For me I was just getting bored so I like to just move on. (Anna)

None of this reveals a clear understanding of the arts in education--either as discrete subjects or subject-integrated--no matter how challenging or "cool" the idea might be. Still, Anna did commit to the school's vision.

When I started here I was here at 6:30 a.m. in terms of a full-time classroom and a full-time art program. I often stayed one night a week late, every one of my NIS⁶ was used prior to art. Lunch was setting up the art class. I had to be really confident and capable in my classroom to feel I could take on the art. The principal gave me two extra NIS so I could set up. It was a huge commitment and I loved it. (Anna)

Hence, she substantiates her point that interest and motivation trumps arts credentials; "If I didn't have the desire, all the credentials in the world wouldn't have helped me." However, Anna overlooks another dimension of this issue. Although she lacked fine arts credentials, she was assigned to the school based on her seniority. Anna had the drive to further educate herself within the field of visual and performing arts. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Perception versus reality

While sharing the perception of the arts as central pedagogy, teachers did explain how they had perceived the initial arts integration plan for Mosaic. Of particular interest are George's comments, since he originated the idea to pursue a fine arts school within the district. This would include the researching and writing of a lengthy proposal to justify such a school. The proposal recommended an initial start-up for students in intermediate grades only. It also suggested the hiring of a physical education specialist to provide classroom release time for teachers to collaborate and work in arts cohorts or "pods" with colleagues. The importance of on-site arts specialists is emphasized. But the school principal's sole decision to offer arts integration to students in Grades 1 through 7 from the outset may have been premature. A pilot program of fewer grades may have been a better starting point. Here George reflects on Mosaic at the time of these interviews.

My original thinking was that it would start at Grade 4...There would be four teachers and those four teachers – music, dance, visual art, drama – each with an area and they would then work together...each person would be responsible for seeing where their specialty could be integrated. That was the plan I think we originally had and we don't have that here...I don't think that our original idea, we're not there yet. We're a long way away from it. (George)

While George voices dissatisfaction with the original school vision, Anna discusses the reality of parental dissatisfaction. Asked if parents ever talked to her about the advantage of an arts-integrated pedagogy, Anna replied that parents were "unhappy with the fact that they didn't know what we would become and I think in many ways we haven't become anything yet and we're several years into it."

⁶Non-instructional service

Physical space also enters the question about teachers' perceptions of the arts. With the unique luxury of having both an art and dance studio, the expectation was that this space would be used for its intended purpose. An arts-integrated school also means the consistent use of different spaces. In her interview, Dana expressed concern about the use of the art room, focussing on Bridget's (the then principal) comment that if the art room was not available, teachers could use their own rooms to teach art, as was the case in all other elementary schools in the district. While this concept was well intended, it also created a new attitude about the art room, resulting in its becoming a space for multiple subjects, particularly for those who taught in portables. In the end, some teachers did not use the art room at all.

I think it kind of gave permission for people not to do it [teach art]. I understand why she said it, but at the same time, my interpretation of that comment and your interpretation of that comment are totally different and I think that's the road we went down and we're down that road and we need to somehow get out of that road. (Dana)

Although these dedicated spaces provided visual evidence to parents that Mosaic was different, they didn't reveal the ongoing necessity of practicing arts-integrated instruction within the walls of a regular classroom. Here, then, is an example of not only parent, but also teacher, perceptions of arts integration: the use of specialized rooms confirms arts integration. Depending on who is using the room that may or may not be the case.

Conclusion

In my experience, pedagogy is often viewed as a top-down strategy for imparting knowledge, that is, knowledge that is absorbed by the learner, with comprehension levels proven through assessment. Arts-integrated pedagogy should provide connections between the arts and other subject areas, thereby creating a more organic approach to learning. While it needs to honor Ministry of Education criteria, it should still be formulated to some extent at the school site in the classroom, based on the competencies and needs of the student population. An understanding of the arts alone and as a means to integrate other subjects requires further investigation by Mosaic staff so that a site-specific pedagogic approach evolves, not simply a mandated curriculum festooned with arts "add-ons" (Bresler, 1995) to satisfy hallway display boards. Teachers need to step outside of their own comfort zones in terms of both pedagogy and their relationships with others.

A shared vision of the arts in education is essential as is teacher autonomy so that they can pursue and share their own visions of arts integration. This will strengthen and further justify Mosaic as a school of choice. However they might define the arts, Mosaic teachers need to remain mindful of the importance of keeping the doors of communication open. A new policy of collaboration will need to be passed on to the next generation of Mosaic teachers. If not, Mosaic might appear to thrive on the surface,⁷ but the underlying tensions of skills levels, competencies and trust could de-stabilize what a well-intentioned few sought to construct.

In the beginning Mosaic existed to accommodate the growing population of students at neighboring elementary schools. With its dramatic population decline in the 1990s, Mosaic could have been closed—fated to become a book depository, storage space, or even rental space

⁷ Parent interviews are generally positive in terms of their children and their own satisfaction with the school.

for private education. With its lovely setting, perhaps it could have become an expensive townhouse development. But none of that happened. Today, Mosaic continues to attract students from outside of its catchment area. Internally, teachers continue to pursue the meaning of arts integration—what it looks like in a classroom—and effective collaboration. At the district level, there needs to be a commitment from both school board administration and union representatives, to employ people who have the arts expertise to develop an evolving and responsive pedagogy centered on the learning capacity of the arts and what they can do to help children efficaciously learn across the curriculum.

Teachers continue to ponder whether the enrolment is driven by the perception of Mosaic as a haven for social, behavioral and academic needs. While seeking to be inclusive, teachers should have sufficient autonomy to ensure implementation of the core objective of teaching through the arts. This bears further investigation if arts integration is to be respected as a valid pedagogy for all students, beyond just those deemed to be “off the wall.”

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